DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 103 CS 208 196

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TITLE A Child's Consciousness of His Own Creative Process.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 24p.; In: OASP Selected Writings, Atlantic Institute of Education, p31-52, May 1981.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Language; Children; *Cognitive Processes; Creative Writing; *Creativity; *Imagery; Metacognition; *Poetry; *Writing Processes; *Writing Research; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Protocol Analysis; *Self Awareness

ABSTRACT

Tests were given to a nine-year-old boy to establish the constraints operating when he was writing poetry. The tests involved writing cloze tests on poems by poet Ted Hughes and on a poem the boy had written a year earlier. The boy was also asked to write a poem and then to discuss what he was thinking as he wrote. The following constraints were identified as operating during his poetry writing: (1) the subject must be exciting, (2) words must be more carefully chosen than in prose, (3) some details are inappropriate for poetry, (4) words must be vivid but not too vivid, (5) some syntax is inappropriate for poetry, and (6) the poetic line is significant. The interview showed that when writing, the boy generally had a vivid mental image to which he tried to match appropriate vocabulary. Some words he struggled for, but some metaphors came easily and without self-consciousness. In a few cases he seemed unaware of the startling appropriateness of his imagery. Thus, the boy was aware of the poem as a type of writing with special constraints that encouraged him to express experiences with controlled vividness. He appeared to be very conscious of his overall purpose even though some of his most vivid imagery was presented unselfconsciously. (Author/HTH)

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A CHILD'S CONSCIOUSNESS OF HIS OWN CREATIVE PROCESS

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A Child's Consciousness of His Own Creative Process

Barry Fox

Abstract: Tests were given to a nine-year-old boy to establish the constraints operating when he was writing poetry. The tests involved writing cloze tests on poems by Ted Hughes and on a poem the boy had written a year earlier. The boy was also asked to write a poem and then to discuss what he was thinking of as he wrote. The following constraints were identified: (1) the subject must be exciting, (2) words must be more carefully chosen than in prose, (3) some details are inappropriate for poetry, (4) words must be vivid but not too vivid, (5) some syntax is inappropriate for poetry, (6) the poetic line is significant. The interview showed that when writing, the boy generally had a vivid mental image to which he tried to match appropriate vocabulary. Some words he struggled for but some metaphors came easily and without self-consciousness. In a few cases, he seemed unaware of the startling appropriateness of his imagery. Thus, the boy was aware of the poem as a type of writing with special constraints which encouraged him to express experiences with controlled vividness. He appeared to be very conscious of his overall purpose even though some of his most vivid imagery is presented unselfconsciously.

A *Introduction: Linguistic Creativity in the Very Young*

The language of very young children abounds in metaphor. Before they have become accustomed to the usual transactional language of life their language is expressive and personal. As I was leaving yesterday morning my five-year-old son said, spontaneously, of the open shoe-polish tin, "That looks like what do you call those mines that don't have trains running into them, but have bull-dozers?" (open cast mines). When I returned that evening with a box containing groceries, his two-year old sister said, "Look, Ned, a boat," and he replied, "That's a good boat".

It will not be long before that exuberance of observation and the lack of inhibition in making comparisons will have gone. The apparently natural inclination to associate any experience in his life with any other, no matter how appropriate the adult world regards it, how approving or otherwide that world is, will soon be flattened by the requirements of transactional language: his nine-year old brother would have said, "That would

make a good boat". When he writes poetry, however, he uses language closer to that of his siblings. Is this language considered and conscious or is it spontaneous and unconscious?

B Writing Poetry

Mental Activity and the Written Product

B1 Of how much linguistic creativity is the older child conscious?

This essay will look at the creative process of a nine-year-old boy whose day-to-day language has become predominantly transactional. It will try to discover how much his process of writing poems is conscious and how much it is not, and besides the use of figurative language the many other linguistic resources at the boy's disposal will also be examined.

It should be pointed out that examining a child's poem from this point of view in no way commits what Wimsatt calls the "intentionist fallacy". The poem by a seven-year-old boy is no less a poem than that by a sixty-year-old smiling public man. Both can be regarded, aesthetically, as self-sufficient. If we look at the seven-year-old's poem qua poem then what went on in his mind as he wrote should not affect our appreciation of the poem in any serious way. From the point of view of the education of the child, however, it is important to know what the child was trying to achieve. In that way the teacher can offer advice and help.

B2 The investigative tests

In order to see how conscious of his creative process the boy was, a series of investigations was designed.

a) The principles and adaptations of cloze tests

In the first experiment the child was presented with an adapted cloze test. The cloze procedure originated as a means of testing reading ability and is generally recognized as being better than the traditional

standardized tests because it requires expectation from the reader, a key feature of the reading process. The procedure involves removing every fifth word from a passage, no matter what the word, and asking the reader to supply the missing words. Recently New York State developed its own form of cloze test. It removes only content words, leaving all function words in place, on the ground that replacing function words does not depend on overall comprehension of what is read but merely on local comprehension.

i) Cloze tests on poetry not written by the child

The New York State adaptation was taken and further adjusted. Since this study is concerned with the creative process and not with the accuracy of the reader's expectations, the test was not scored. A situation was being designed whereby a child would, in effect, be creating a poem of his own and so there would be no right answers. Secondly, two short poems by Ted Hughes were used (see Appendix A) rather than pieces of prose. All but one of the words were content words. Only one verb was removed because the taped discussion on the child's own poems (mentioned later and a sample of which is also found in Appendix A) concentrated on verbs and the investigator wanted to see the creative process acting on other parts of speech. Consequently, three nouns, three adjectives and one function word, a subordinating conjunction, were removed.

The taped discussion which followed the tests involved the boy's reasons for his selections and then a comparison between what he had selected and the poet's original words. The latter exercise was to probe into how deeply he had considered the words he had used.

ii) Cloze test on poems written previously by the child

Another experiment involved a cloze treatment of a poem which the boy had written about a year before and most of which he had evidently forgotten. As he attempted to complete the sense of the work

both at the literal and imaginative level we would again be witnessing the creative process centred on a few key words. Unlike Hughes' poems, however, this poem would be far closer to the personal and personal-imaginative experience of the boy. When the boy had finished, a taped discussion of the reasons for his choices followed.

b) The child writes a poem of his own

A third experiment required the boy to write a poem on anything he liked. The only other instruction he was given was that he should not erase anything he had written. All attempts were to be left for the investigator to examine. On the same day that the child wrote the poem he was interviewed by the investigator. The interview was taped.

After the boy had discussed his efforts in this small battery of creative exercises the investigator hoped to have a good idea about what he was conscious of as he committed himself to written language.

B3 Acknowledged constraints

a) The constraint of the poetic form as substitute for audience.

One of the reasons that children fail to produce convincing writing is that they are not clear what their audience is. If the notion of the actual audience for a given piece of writing is not consistent, then the register will not be consistent and the piece will lack integrity. The type of imagined audience governs not only the type of vocabulary and syntax which are used but even the details which are included, and in a much larger sense the overall meaning of what is said. The register which the writer selects as appropriate to the context, subject matter, and audience places constraints on the language available to him.

In the interviews with the boy it appears that he had no concept of an audience as he wrote. Nevertheless each piece of writing has

integrity and it is very clear that he felt constraints on what he was able to write about and on the style appropriate to it. It seems that taking the place of an imagined audience was the consciousness of a register appropriate to the literary form in which he had been asked to write - the poem. It is his consciousness of the constraints placed on him by the poetic form that we turn to now, as they appear to dominate his creative process.

b) The constraint of the subject

In his interview about his poem "The Fishes" the boy shows that if he is to write a poem the subject must be one that excites him. Only some subjects are suitable, he says. Water makes a good scene and so do fish and birds. This might suggest that he has succumbed to Woolworth's-Romanticism, but since he categorically rejects as a subject the thatched Tudor cottage in which he was living during his year's visit to England, this is evidently not the case. Some personal details may help here: For several weeks his father had been urging him to write something about the cottage, believing that the boy would find it so different from his Canadian house that he would be excited by it. Nevertheless the boy insisted that he wasn't interested in writing about it. On the other hand, ever since he had arrived at the cottage he had been obsessed by the hope of seeing a fish in the small stream nearby, and had bought a small line in the hope of catching one. A week before, a friend had caught one in his hand and the boy was very excited about it. In the interview he said he wrote about the fish because "I like the way fish swim, I suppose."

c) The constraint of lexical accuracy

So the subject is special; and so is the lexis. Several times the

boy states this: He rejects went in "[the fishing line] went up and came down"("Fishes") because "everybody uses it" and wrench in "Wrench, it tried to fish my hand off" ("Crab") because "wrench sounds more like a story really. It's sort of explaining the sound". Rejecting went because "everybody uses it" suggests that rarity of the vocabulary is all that he considers important in writing poetry. But his statements regarding his choice of dribbled ("dribbled rather matches it") and drawing, ("[the fishing line looked] as if someone had taken a pen . . . and drawn a squashed semi-circle") show that it is the accuracy of the word in conveying what the child is dealing with which is paramount, that rarity is a mere concomitant of this process and is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition, though it may be a usual one.

d) The constraint of descriptive detail

He is conscious too that descriptive details should be special. About the fishing line catching in the nettles, which he doesn't mention in the poem, he says, "it was stuck but I don't like saying the line was stuck . . . . If you're writing a story that's what you'd say, but it isn't a story, it's a poem."

e) The constraint of lexical vividness

A poem "explains the thing, more than a story does", hence its special lexis. The boy uses explain in all three interviews. In "gorillas/Who are partial to the huge delicate eggs" ("Moon-Nasturtiums") he says huge explains big better than giant and in "Gray and cross/Like a bull-crab" "[bull] explains [cross] more than just mad". Poety and poetic vocabulary, then, should be more vivid than normal narrative, and the boy has tried to make them so in his writing.

i) This constraint operates only when he is excited

Although he considers it important that his vocabulary "explain" things as well as possible, it is not surprising (nor desirable, from the reader's point of view) that some words are not especially vivid. This is illustrated in the boy's observations in "Fishes":

I threw the line into the water

It swerved up and came down.

There are two verbs here, both of which were originally non-descript but only one which the writer was dissatisfied with. Despite what he said on the tape, his mother reports that he had considerable trouble with went. He tried glided and then, she reports, after a considerable time swerved came to him in a flash and clearly delighted him. It appears, therefore, that vivid vocabulary is only required when the child is really excited by what he is writing about. The shape of the fishing line takes up two lines in the poem and calls a metaphor into being. There is nothing of interest in the fishing line itself, so the neutral threw is good enough to describe its movement. It should be noted here, though, that the child does not appear to be conscious of the discrepency between the quality of his verbs.

ii) This constraint is not a licence to exaggerate

Nevertheless, in spite of the requirement to be vivid the constraint to "explain" does not offer free licence. The boy was very aware of the problems of exaggeration. He strongly criticized Hughes's "Moon-Tulips" because Hughes "made them too much like an army. He made it as though it really is an army and there's not much to say about the flowers themselves". He rejects rockets, his own substitution, for the deleted anacondas in "the green caterpillars there are the size of rockets" on the ground that his own image is too exaggerated; and prefers his new simile for careful speed "faster than a beetle" over "slower than a snail" in

describing his hand coming down to catch a crab ("Crab") because "snail's a bit exaggerated to slowness. Beetles go faster than snails".

f) The constraints of syntax

Although it is the selection of adequate vocabulary which dominates the boy's consciousness of his process, he is aware to some degree of constraints on syntax. He does not explain his objection very clearly, but his rejection of wrench ("Crab") does seem to be on the gounds of syntax. He appears to reject the original wrench because it is a type of interjection, "It's sort of explaining the sound. It goes wrench [there is a fall in his voice as he says this]" and while it would be suitable for a narrative, he says, it is not suitable for a poem. His selection of then in "Then under someone else's window" ("Moon-Tulips") is also based on syntax. Besides recognizing the need for a grammatical equivalent for then, he recognizes the need for a content rather than function word since "Ted Hughes never really starts this poem anyway with anything interesting like, er, well, presenting or bouquet" .

g) The constraint of the poetic line

The boy is also conscious of constraints which the form of the poem places upon the structure of his writing: he regards the poetic line as having a special character. He says that a line in a poem is like a sentence in a story, "It's one idea" and although most lines end "almost automatically" he is very conscious of trying to find a place to end what turns out to be his final line. In the end he settles for a line three times longer than the average of the others and places a long irregular mark at the side to show that it is to be considered as one poetic line.

h) Other constraints

Two details from the interviews which, though perhaps peripheral,

help to give a more complete picture of the boy's awareness of what a poem requires and permits concerning vocabulary and the movement of the poetic line. The boy is looking for a word to describe the movement of the fish. To describe its upward movement he chooses flopped which the experienced reader would find an effective choice. It might appear from this that he considers that poetry is a form where the semantic constraints of language do not obtain. Perhaps, unconsciously, he does believe this since he uses the neologism "crampy" in "Crab" without concerning himself whether it is a part of traditional vocabulary or his own invention. When it was elicited from him that flopped is associated with a downward movement, however, he wished to change the word. This suggests that he is not quite confident of the lexical freedom which poetry offers.

Whether he believes that poetry encourages special rhythms is similarly unclear, but in one instance it is apparent that he had a special rhythmic movement in mind. Quite gratuitously he reprimands the interviewer for his flat reading of "It swerved up and came down". The boy points out that he intended the line to be read with an upward movement as far as "up" and a downward movement as far as "down".

B4 Mental activity and the external stimulus

This essay now turns from the boy's awareness of the relationship between his mental activity and the written product to that between his mental activity and the external stimulus that prompts that activity.

a) Importance of sense impressions

Not surprisingly, the predominant source of the experiences which he calls on is his senses. While he was writing both "Fishes" and "Crab" he appears to have constructed in his mind a very clear visual representation of the events which he is describing, and he appealed to this picture not only as he was searching for the right word but also as he explains his

lexical selection to the interviewer.

When asked why he changed pushed to raised in "I pushed a rock away" he replies "I put raised there because I raised the rock", and when asked why he had originally put pushed he replies, "Well, really raised and pushed are sort of the same thing. One end stayed up and the other stayed down." Here, then, he is more concerned with his real source than with selecting the evocative word. In trying to describe the movement of the stream in "Fishes" his mother reports that he was troubled. Eventually he settled on dribbling even though he felt awkward about it. He says, "I suppose dribbling rather matches it". That's what it looked and sounded like, I suppose". Here again his eye is on the mental image, but this time he searches for the suitable word. The image is vivid in his mind, since he not only sees it but hears it too, and the word for which he is searching must "match" the stimuli of both senses.

Even in the imagined reality of Ted Hughes's moon world, he appears to be using the senses of his imagination, especially his sight. He rejects the concept of jungles of nasturtiums, Hughes's word, because jungles take up so much space there would be no room for rocket ships to land. He prefers his own substitution of "clusters" of nasturtiums.

b) Inferred involvement with the stimulus governs the selection of details

The boy, then reconstructs from memory in the case of his own poems and in his imagination in the case of the Hughes poems, a scene to which he appeals as he tries to describe it as accurately as possible. But, as has been shown in the discussion of the fishing line being thrown into the water, when dealing with a scene, he does not regard all details as equally important, though this is a fact which we must infer since he does not comment on it.

c) Inferred involvement illustrated by a hierarchy of imagery

It is instructive to look at a hierarchy of imagery in such lines as:

I threw the line into the water
It swerved up and came down
Drawing a squashed semi-circle

("Fishes")

At the bottom is threw, a neutral word which is literal and pedestrian. At a higher level comes the word which he struggles for, swerved, and the image "semi-circle" - both of which are vivid but literal. And highest comes drawing which is vivid and goes beyond the bounds of literal description.

We do not know why he chose threw but it does appear to be an unimportant action when compared with those which follow. We know he was dissatisfied with went in describing the moving arc of the fishing line and struggled through glided until he reached swerved; and we have his comment on the metaphor, drawing. When speaking about it he appears not to know about the qualitative change. His explanation, that "that's what it was a bit like" is matter-of-fact. He appears to have been so close to the experience in describing it that his artifice was unconscious, though in discussing it afterwards he can stand back and say "It was as if someone had taken a pen and pencil and drawn a squashed semi-circle".

d) Inferred vividness of mental image explains vividness of metaphor

He does not repeat the casualness evident in "that's what it was a bit like" in discussing other metaphors, but the easy discussions of them nevertheless again indicate the vividness of his mental image. One of the words from "Crab", deleted for the test, was "clawing", in "clawing like cat", and was used to describe the movement of the sea onto the beach. In the cloze test the boy substituted pouncing but preferred his original word when told what it was. He said clawing was better because "waves come up and

then fold in a bit and then curl up as though it's clawing like a cat". In the previous line, "The water/ . . . curled its waves", he rejected his later substitution of threw, in place of curled, even though he "felt as though it [the sea] was throwing it, sort of having a bucket at one end, and throwing the water across the top and it comes along the other side". He prefers curled because the sea curls its waves.

In:

> The water rippled quietly
> Dribbling along its path

I have already discussed his dissatisfaction with rippled but satisfaction with dribbling because dribbling conveyed well both the sound and appearance of the stream. It is interesting that he is happier with dribbled (the metaphor) than with rippled (the merely literal).

e) Inferred vividness of the character of the subject used to explain vividness of metaphor

In addition to these images there are some which do not seem to be based in the clear visual picture in the boy's mind. The most striking of these is the designation of the gray and cross crab as "bullcrab". He justifies this with "it sounds better for a poem. It explains it more than just mad . . . Everybody says bulls are rather cross and I think bull is better". Again, he appears to be so close to his subject, this time to its character rather than to its mental image, that metaphor seems the most appropriate means of being vivid and its use appears to be entirely natural to him.

B5 Sense as the overriding consideration

Although the whole world knows that rhyme is poetry and poetry rhyme, from the evidence of his substitutions in Hughes's poems it seems that the boy was not aware of this truism. At least, the constraints of rhyme had no apparent effect on him since three of his substitutions come in

rhymed positions and none was rhymed. The boy certainly used rhyme, for his mother reports he is constantly making up irritating jingles. It seems, therefore, that he is concentrating on the sense of what he is writing. His good understanding of the needs of sense are illustrated by his comment on "racket", his word for the general noise of the band of tulips. The word does not come from his own attitude to brass bands but from clues within "Moon-Tulips" itself:

> Q. Why did you say racket?
> A. Well, because it's noise and here it says nobody asked them and nobody takes any notice of them and it says here as though it's silly nonsense. Not comedy, just stupid to the people who are there.

Hughes's word is blare.

B6 Unconscious subtleties

Besides speaking about what he was conscious of, the boy also spoke about what he was not thinking of, and it is to these statements that this essay turns now.

The sensitive reader who looks at the poems qua poems may become aware of a number of details which appear to have been very skilfully presented. If, however, we examine these details heeding the introspective comments of the writer, the presentation seems far less skilful. One such detail is the boy's substitution of beetle for snail in:

> Down went my hand
> Faster than a snail
>
> ("Crab")

His justification is that snail is an exaggerated image of slowness. A sensitive reader might believe beetle the better choice, also, because the movements of the legs could be likened to the movements of the fingers on the hand as it tried to catch the crab. There would be ambiguity in the Empsonian sense, which would give the image more strength. The boy denied that he was thinking of the similarity of the beetle to a hand.

Another such example from the same poem is encountered in the change to the present tense in "There is the crab on its back" when the rest of

the poem is written in the past tense. Here we have a dramatic contrast between what the boy hoped for (a crab) and what the situation actually was:

> I opened my hand
> There is the crab on its back.

This may have been in the boy's mind when he wrote it, or it may have been an instinctive use of tense, but whatever the reason, by the time he came to replace the deleted word he was not aware of it, for his substitution struggled is in the past tense. The interview shows that the boy does not understand the questioner's suggestion that is is the better choice.

Similarly, in "Moon Nasturtiums" it might be considered that the boy's selection of rockets instead of anacondas was made because of its association with the moon, creating an element of cohesion in the poem where none had been before; but the boy denied that this was in his mind. And in "Crab", the possibly onomatopoeic r in "raised a rock away" instead of the original "pushed a rock away" was apparently not in the boy's mind:

> Q. Your substitution had nothing to do with the sound "raised a rock away"?
> A. What do you mean? No.

C *Conclusions*

C1 *Lexis dominates the linguistic creative process*

The most striking fact to emerge from the investigation is the large amount of conscious control the boy had over his creative process. If we consider his work at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax, and semantics, what dominates his consciousness is lexis - not only his own comments but the report of the eureka-like arrival of swerved are ample evidence of this. On the other hand it is also interesting to note what he was not conscious of at these linguistic levels. He does not appear to be conscious of phonology; he shows an awareness of syntax only as he considers what is not acceptable; and the semantics of the poems are governed by the incident which stirred them into being.

C2 *A good awareness of paralinguistic features*

In the realm of paralinguistics, a realm which is very important to poetry because form is so important to it, he is conscious of several aspects: the subject of the poem must be chosen carefully and be interesting; he is conscious of line length; and he has some awareness of the movement of the voice.

C3 *Creation of metaphor appears to lack cerebration*

Now for the activity which is at the heart of creativity - the ability to see similarity in disparate objects . . . the ability to create metaphors. About this matter we have to infer, but it does seem that he was not conscious of the process which led to the creation of his metaphors. He seems not to have been looking around for an apt comparison, as he seems to have done in the case of much of his other vocabulary. This is suggested by the easy way in which he commented on such items as the movement of the waves and clawing, and the fishing line drawing a semi-circle.

C4 *Some subtleties of detail may be accidental*

The broader suggestions of this investigation confirm what has often been suspected, that only some of the successes of children's writing should be put down to their conscious effort. Nevertheless, it is surprising to find that some of the most subtle details the boy was not conscious of - although this does not imply that they were fortuitous.

C5 *Further suggestions for investigation*

This investigation also suggests ways in which further investigation should go and poses questions which should be or should have been asked.

Were the overall scenes of "Fishes" and "Crabs" the result of a macroimagination, or were they an illusion created by patching together the many small details? What governed line length and syntactic structure

in "Crab"? Britton speaks of an essential characteristic of poetic utterances as being "movement of thought" (Britton, 1975, p. 90). How much movement was the boy conscious of? Was he trying to work to a conclusion or shape what he wrote? Many of these questions might have been answered had the interviewer been more astute.

A far more fundamental question, however, would need much more investigation and that is the creative process of a boy of nine closer to that of an adult's verbal creativity than to that of the young child who "hasn't yet constructed an adult reality" (Wilkinson, 1971, p.86). That is, is the creation of metaphors conscious artifice or an unconscious necessity deserving no more praise than being able to call a mountain a hill.

If it is the latter case, as it appears to be, it is ironic that the aspect of writing which the world at large considers to be the most typically poetic - the creation of metaphor - would not in Britton's taxonomy, be considered poetic since the child has not complied with one of the essential features of poetic utterances, that the writer attends to "the utterance as utterance" (Britton, quoted in Wilkinson, 1975, p. 179).

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Appendix A

Moon-Nasturtiums

Nasturtiums on earth are small and seething with horrible
    green caterpillars.
On the moon they are giant, jungles of them, and swarming
    with noisy gorillas.
And the green caterpillars there are the size of anacondas.
The butterflies that hatch from those are one of the moon's
    greatest wonders.
Though few survive the depredations of the gorillas
Who are partial to the succulent huge eggs that produce
    such caterpillars.

Ted Hughes, The Earth Owl and Other Moon-People (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 19.

Moon-Tulips

Tulips on the moon are a kind of military band.
A bed of crimson ones will march up to your window and
take its stand.
Then out of their flashing brass and silver they rip some
Prussian fanfare.
Nobody asked them, and nobody takes any notice of their
blare.
After a while, they about turn and to kettledrums goose-
step away.
Soon under somebody else's window they are presenting the
same deafening bouquet.

Ted Hughes, The Earth Owl and Other Moon-People (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 34.

Fishes

The water rippled quietly

Dribbleing along it's path

I threw the line into the water

It ~~went~~ swurved up and came down

Drawing a squashed cemi-circle

~~It was~~ The line was imprisoned in a jail

With bars of nettles and thorns

The fish ~~plonked~~ flopped up for a

fly and plonked down

as though it were dead

glided

23 October 1978

Age 9

The Crampy Crab

The water was trying to steel the beach
as it curled its waves
clawing like a cat.
I pushed a rock away and
LO AND BEHOLD
a crab.
Gray and cross
like a bull crab.
Down went my hand
faster than a snail
slower than a boat.
Wrench, it tryed to fish my hand off.
I opened my hand.
There is the crab on its back.
Away it darted like fish.
Through a cavelike passage to the sea.

October, 1978

Age 9